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LOWELL AND THE CLASSICS

The centenary of the birth of James Russell Lowell is a fitting time to consider his attitude toward the classics and their place in modern education.

Lowell's classical training bore rich fruit in his writings. To use his own words concerning the best modern writers in general, they are "steeped in and saturated with Greek literature." All the way from brief allusions to extended discussions, the classical influence is well marked. Greek he recognizes as the fountain source of modern literature, not to be closely imitated but followed in spirit. Latin poetry he feels has had a somewhat exotic growth; yet he shows regard for Lucretius, Catullus, Vergil, and Horace. In one connection he commends the Latin element in the English language as superior material for thought and style, including poetic diction. Many of his poems have classical titles and themes, and the tone of his lyrics suggests the classical spirit.

In Lowell's lifetime modern languages became prominent in education. In his address before the Modern Language Association of America (1889) Lowell relates the innovation. He had shown even in college a pioneer interest in modern languages and served for many years as professor of modern languages at Harvard. Yet he is drawn toward the old order, even while advocating a more prominent place in education for modern literature. Regarding the relations of the ancients and moderns he says: "No, they are not antagonists, but by their points of disparity, of likeness, or contrast, they can be best understood, perhaps understood only through each other. The scholar must have them both, but may not he who has not leisure to be a scholar find profit even in the lesser of the two, if that only be attainable? Have I admitted that one is the lesser? *O matre pulchra filia pulchrior* is perhaps what I should say here."

In the case of science versus literature Lowell's attitude is expressed in "Our Literature" (1889). Literature, he feels, holds an inferior place in general estimation. "I am not insensible to the wonder and exhilaration of a material growth without example in rapidity and expansion, but I am also not insensible to the grave perils latent in any civilization which allows its chief energies and interests to be wholly absorbed in the pursuit of a mundane prosperity." In literature is "the power of molding words into such fair and noble forms as shall people the human mind forever with images that refine, console, and inspire."

Lowell believed that the classics, if not to be prescribed, should be given every encouragement as liberal studies. In his "Harvard Anniversary" (1886) he says: "One of the arguments against the compulsory study of Greek, namely, that it is wiser to give our time to modern languages and modern history than to dead languages and ancient history, involves, I think, a verbal fallacy. Only those languages can properly be called dead in which nothing living has been written. If the classic languages are dead, they yet speak to us, and with a clearer voice than that of any living tongue."